Dr. Martin

ENG 101

31 October 2020

Playing by the Rules:

The "Dungeon Masters Only" Forum as a Discourse Community

When imagining a discourse community, many people will picture a professional organization or academic discipline. However, when using John Swales's definition, a wide variety of groups can be considered discourse communities, including some hobby groups that meet exclusively online. These groups may have complex conventions for communication, just like more formal communities. In this paper, I examine one online group made up of players of the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Using insights gained through observation and analysis of texts produced and referenced in the community, I consider how the dungeon masters (DMs) who gather on the D&D Beyond forum "Dungeon Masters Only" exhibit the characteristics of a discourse community. Although the members of this discourse community are highly creative, I argue, successful participation means adopting an identity kit that revolves around the game's official rules.

Before we can examine how the discourse community of DMs on the "Dungeon Masters Only" forum uses a rules-based identity kit, we need to understand what discourse communities and identity kits are. In "The concept of a discourse community," John Swales argues a group must meet six characteristics to qualify as a discourse community—it must have mechanisms of communication, utilize those mechanisms for information exchange and feedback, possess genres, use specialized language, maintain a balance between novices and experts, and work toward a common goal (24-27). Additionally, as James Gee suggests, each discourse community

has a unique identity kit, "which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write" (7). As a discourse community that meets all six of Swales's characteristics, the "Dungeon Masters Only" forum has an identity kit. The way members act, behave, and communicate on the forum reveal how members use this identity kit to project an identity closely tied to rules.

The most obvious way the "Dungeon Masters Only" forum matches Swales's definition of a discourse community is through its use of communication mechanisms. According to Swales, discourse communities needs ways for members to communicate with one another (25). As an online forum, "Dungeon Masters Only" has a built-in communication mechanism, fulfilling Swales's requirement. The forum allows users to create threads and reply to other community members directly. Although "Dungeon Masters Only" is open to anyone, the forum does have rules. For example, users cannot post inappropriate or copyright-protected content without being penalized ("Site Rules & Guidelines"). The discourse community's interest in rules can therefore be seen to begin in how its communication mechanisms are managed.

The "Dungeon Masters Only" discourse community also meets Swale's requirement that discourse communities use their communication mechanisms primarily to exchange information and feedback. DMs need lots of information to create and run games, and part of obtaining this information involves talking with other DMs. On the "Dungeon Masters Only" forum, members use threads to debate the meaning of rules, share advice and resources with other DMs, and request and receive feedback on the game materials they create, making the forum a strong example of how discourse communities use their communication mechanisms. The emphasis the community places on rules can be seen in the large number of threads providing or requesting

information about game mechanics, as in a thread started by user novadragon07 titled "What exactly does 6-8 encounters per adventuring day mean?"

To facilitate information exchange, the DMs in the "Dungeon Masters Only" discourse community utilize unique genres. This is another characteristic of a discourse community according to Swales, who says that genres come with expectations about "the form, function and positioning of discoursal elements" (26). The "Dungeon Masters Only" discourse community possesses several genres derived from one of the group's most referenced texts: the *Player's Handbook*. These genres include the spell description, the item description, and the class description, and they all come with expectations for how information is presented. When created by DMs, texts in these genres are called "homebrew." When writing in homebrew genres, community members "play by the rules" by formatting elements and writing in the same style as the *Player's Handbook*. In one homebrew spell, for example, user TopologicalScopes provides the spell level and school of magic under the spell name, uses second person, and uses bullet points to list two possible spell effects. Even the spell's name, "Exchange Life," mirrors the names of official spells in the *Player's Handbook*, such as "Remove Curse" (271), "Heat Metal" (250), and "Locate Object" (256). TopologicalScopes explains that they created the spell to get around a limitation in the official rules. However, other users found that their homebrew spell had rule-related weaknesses and recommended that they modify an official spell instead, demonstrating the community's interest in both adhering to rules and bending them. A more successful example of homebrew mimicking the established genre conventions is the "Mimic Book of Mimics," which has over 80,000 views. At the beginning of the section titled "Playable Mimic Race Details," author Sam_Hain places a text box containing a few lines of dialogue, mirroring the narrative excerpts at the beginning of similar descriptions in the *Player's*

Handbook. The rest of the post follows the established genre format closely, as well, incorporating images, tables, and headings. Sam_Hain pushes at the boundaries of the genre, using meme speak and deviating from the self-serious style of official *Dungeons & Dragons* publications, but they display extensive knowledge of the rules, keeping their homebrew in-line with the community's rule-focused identity kit.

Coincidentally, the term "homebrew" is also an example of how the "Dungeon Masters Only" discourse community uses "lexical items known to the wider speech communities in special and technical ways," another characteristic of a discourse community (Swales 26). The term usually refers to alcohol brewed at home, but to DMs it means something different. The DMs who gather on "Dungeon Masters Only" also utilize acronyms and other specialized language. As dictated by the community's rule-focused identity kit, many of these terms refer to rules or come from official *Dungeons & Dragons* books. In their thread asking for rule clarification, novadragon07 uses acronyms to refer to books such as "SKT" (*Storm King's Thunder*) and "CoS" (*Curse of Strahd*). Other examples of specialized language present in novadragon07's post include "module," "adventure," "encounter," and "long rest." The first two terms refer to prewritten game materials like the books listed above, and the second two terms refer to official game mechanics.

With so many specialized terms in use, newer group members may understandably struggle to keep up. Nonetheless, productive discourse on the forum continues because "Dungeon Masters Only" meets yet another one of Swales's requirements for a discourse community: the community maintains "a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and expertise" (27). When novice DMs start threads asking for help, there are always plenty of experienced DMs to chime in. In response to novadragon07's question, for

example, CharlesThePlant provides a thorough explanation of the rule at hand and makes

recommendations based on practical experience, writing "while the average D&D session is

probably around 3 to 4 hours long…most people don't have time for more than 2 to 3 encounters

per session." This suggests that an "expert" in the community has near-encyclopedic knowledge

of the game's rules and genres, as well as experience running real games. Furthermore, experts

like CharlesThePlant utilize the community's identity kit, portraying themselves as individuals

who know the rules and when to break them. In discourse communities, the ability to

communicate appropriately is gained through "scaffolded and supported interaction" with more

experienced members (Gee 7). Therefore, as novices interact with experts, they gain the ability

to use the community's rule-focused identity kit, as well.

The novices and experts that participate in the "Dungeon Masters Only" forum work

together toward a common goal, which is Swales's last defining criteria of a discourse

community. According to Swales, a discourse community's goals "may be formally

inscribed…or they may be more tacit" (24). The latter is more accurate in the case of "Dungeon

Masters Only." Rather than stating their aims outright, the community reveals two main goals

through the ways they use the forum. First, the community aims to crowdsource reliable answers

to questions relevant to DMs, as evidenced by the threads asking for rule clarification and

advice. Second, the community aims to help DMs of all levels create and share homebrew

materials that fit within the game's rule set, as evidenced by the threads posting and

workshopping homebrew. The community's identity kit informs how members go about meeting

these goals, leading them to reference the rule books and critique homebrew that clashes with the

rules. At the same time, members' rule knowledge enables them to understand when the rules

should be bent in service of fun. When Sam_Hain uses meme speak in "The Mimic Book of

Mimics," they exemplify the way the community balances genre conventions and rules with creativity and fun. Instead of pushing new DMs away, this balance draws them in, allowing the community to share more information, recruit members, and effectively work toward their goals.

The "Dungeon Masters Only" discourse community may not be a formal organization or academic discipline. However, the group's effort to adhere to official *Dungeons & Dragons* rules and genre conventions while remaining welcoming to DMs of all experience levels indicates that communication within the community is still quite sophisticated. The forum's members meet all of Swales's requirements for classification as a discourse community and utilize an identity kit focused on playing by the rules. The DMs in the group use the forum's communication mechanisms, genres, and specialized language for a common and noble goal—to share knowledge about *Dungeons & Dragons* and make a complicated set of rules more accessible and fun for everyone.

Works Cited

CharlesThePlant. "What exactly does 6-8 encounters per adventuring day mean?" *Dungeon*

    Masters Only, 7 June 2020. *D&D Beyond*, www.dndbeyond.com/forums/dungeons-

    dragons-discussion/dungeon-masters-only/70730-what-exactly-does-6-8-encounters-per-

    adventuring. Accessed 23 October 2020.

Gee, James Paul. "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction." *The Journal of Education*,

    vol. 171, no. 1, 1989, pp. 5-18.

novadragon07. "What exactly does 6-8 encounters per adventuring day mean?" *Dungeon*

    Masters Only, 7 June 2020. *D&D Beyond*, www.dndbeyond.com/forums/dungeons-

    dragons-discussion/dungeon-masters-only/70730-what-exactly-does-6-8-encounters-per-

    adventuring. Accessed 23 October 2020.

Player's Handbook. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Sam_Hain. "The Mimic Book of Mimics." *Dungeon Masters Only*, 11 June 2018. *D&D Beyond*,

    www.dndbeyond.com/forums/dungeons-dragons-discussion/dungeon-masters-

    only/18708-the-mimic-book-of-mimics. Accessed 23 October 2020.

"Site Rules & Guidelines." *Dungeon Masters Only*, 17 March 2017. *D&D Beyond*,

    www.dndbeyond.com/forums/d-d-beyond-general/news-announcements/2-site-rules-

    guidelines. Accessed 31 October 2020.

Swales, John M. "The concept of discourse community." *Genre Analysis: English in academic*

    and research settings. Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 21-32.

TopologicalScopes. "Homebrew spell - Exchange Life." *Dungeon Masters Only*, 21 May 2020.

    D&D Beyond, www.dndbeyond.com/forums/dungeons-dragons-discussion/dungeon-

    masters-only/68499-homebrew-spell-exchange-life. Accessed 23 October 2020.